

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *Memoirs of a Geisha*

Author: Arthur Golden

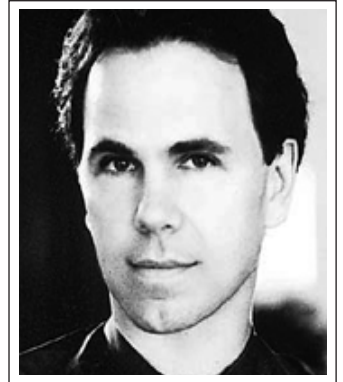
Arthur Golden was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and was educated at Harvard College, where he received a degree in art history, specializing in Japanese art. In 1980 he earned an M.A. in Japanese history from Columbia University, where he also learned Mandarin Chinese. Following a summer in Beijing University, he worked in Tokyo, and, after returning to the United States, earned an M.A. in English from Boston University. He resides in Brookline, Massachusetts, with his wife and two children. *Memoirs of a Geisha* is his first novel.

Name: Arthur Golden-

Born: 1956, in Chattanooga, TN.

Education: Harvard College, B.A. (art history); Columbia University, M.A. (Japanese history), 1980; Boston University, M.A. (English), 1988.

Interests: Classical guitar



Career:

Writer. Worked for an English-language magazine in Tokyo, 1980-82.

Past Writings:

Memoirs of a Geisha, Knopf (New York, NY), 1997.

Works in Progress:

A historical novel set in the United States.

Media Adaptations:

Memoirs of a Geisha was recorded as an audiobook, Random House (New York, NY), 1997. *Memoirs of a Geisha* has been translated into thirty-three languages, and rights were sold for an American film adaptation in 1997 to Red Wagon Productions. *Memoirs of a Geisha* will be adapted for a film directed by Steven Spielberg. Production begins in September 2004.



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Sidelights:

Arthur Golden made a splash when he came on the literary scene in 1997 with the publication of his novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*, the fictional autobiography of a Japanese geisha during the 1920s and 1930s. A phenomenal best seller, this novel sold more than four million copies in English alone in a little over three years and has been translated into thirty-three languages. Many reviewers have praised the work for its portrayal of an obscure and little-understood part of Japanese culture and have marveled that a white American male should write such a work. *Newsweek* reviewer Jeff Giles called it “a faux autobiography ten years and 2,300 pages in the making A few reservations aside, Golden has written a novel that's full of cliffhangers great and small, a novel that is never out of one's possession, a novel that refuses to stay shut.” Film rights were sold to an American motion picture company, and work proceeded slowly on the project, which was still a work-in-progress in 2004.

Golden was raised in a literary family; his cousin Arthur Ochs Sulzberger is publisher of the *New York Times*. After earning a bachelor's degree in art history from Harvard University, a master's degree in Japanese history from Columbia University, and another master's degree in English from Boston University, Golden worked for an English-language magazine in Tokyo from 1980 to 1982. While in Japan, he met a man whose mother was a geisha and found the topic interesting. When Golden began toying with the idea of writing a novel, he remembered the intrigue he had felt about geishas and believed the topic would adapt well to a fictional treatment. Although an oft-taught tenet of writing is to write about topics the writer knows, Golden decided it was “better to write about what sparks . . . [the] imagination,” he told *Maclean's* writer Tanya Davies, “and the geisha district in Kyoto, Japan, sparked mine.”

Golden is well-versed in the Japanese language, and even in Mandarin Chinese, so the language posed no barrier to his research. After conducting copious research about geishas in secondary sources, he embarked on the writing of a third-person novel that begins with the son of a geisha as a child. He discarded the novel when he decided that the geisha as the central character would be more interesting. Golden began his “second” novel after meeting Mineko Iwasaki, who had been a geisha during the 1960s and 1970s. From Iwasaki, whom he interviewed for several weeks, Golden learned details of geisha life that helped in the writing of the new version; but the second version, also in third-person, earned the epithet of “dry” from several of Golden's friends, who are professional writers. Not wanting to give up on a project with six years of effort invested, Golden rethought the novel, obsessing over it for a week. Finally he decided to make the leap to writing in first-person, which turned out to be the right move.

Even so, Golden knew that he had several cultural divides to bridge and that the success of his endeavor would be judged by how well he managed these issues: another and non-Western culture, another time period, and another gender. Even after deciding on the first-person voice and relying on his new research, Golden had to find a way to integrate the information needed by non-Japanese readers to understand the culture. The solution turned out to be placing his Japanese heroine in the West and employing the device of a fictional translator, as Golden explained at the Random House Web site: “The content is entirely fiction, although the historic facts of a geisha's life are accurate. The translator is also an invention . . . I had to find a way to make it believable for Sayuri to annotate the story as she told it . . . I wanted the reader to know from the beginning of the book that she is living in New York City, telling her story, looking back at her life . . . and talking to a Westerner. Under these circumstances, she would naturally annotate her story as she told it.”

As Joanne Wilkinson wrote in *Booklist*, Golden “melds sparkling historical fiction with a compelling coming-of-age story.” The work recounts the tale of young Chiyo Sakamoto, born to a poor family in a Japanese fishing village. Following their mother's death during the depression years, their father sells nine-year-old Chiyo and her older sister Satsu. Satsu's fate is to become a prostitute, but the lovely Chiyo is bought by the madam of the Nitta okiya. Chiyo learns music, dance, and the tea ceremony, and wears the heavy costumes and makeup of the geisha. Her beauty soon surpasses that of the scheming Hatsumomo, until then the okiya's head geisha. Chiyo



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Sidelights: (Continued)

loses her virginity to a man who pays a record price in a bidding war.

Many reviewers discussed the author's ability to adequately portray the thoughts and feelings of a woman. "What is striking about the novel is Mr. Golden's creation of an utterly convincing narrator, a woman who is, at once, a traditional product of Japan's archaic gender relations and a spirited . . . heroine," wrote Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times Book Review*. "Mr. Golden allows her to relate her story in chatty, colloquial terms that enable the reader to identify with her feelings of surprise, puzzlement and disgust at the rituals she must endure. . . . Mr. Golden gives us not only a richly sympathetic portrait of a woman, but also a finely observed picture of an anomalous and largely vanished world." Chiyo is tutored by Mameha, a renowned geisha, and becomes very successful during the 1930s and 1940s. As a professional, she takes a new name, Sayuri. After many men and years, she becomes mistress of the Chairman of an electrical supply company, whom she first met in the okiya; and he cares for her until his death. Golden has often been asked about the role of geisha in Japan as compared to the Western notion of the prostitute; he likens the geisha to a mistress maintained by a single lover in Western culture.

Not all reviewers found Golden's characters convincing, however. While *New Leader* critic Gabriel Brownstein praised Golden's use of inanimate details, he found that his characters "fail to convey any emotional, psychological or historical complexities. His narrative is imposed on an exotic world rather than organic to it" and felt Sayuri's desire for the Chairman "is not demonstrated through the logic of the story either. She merely reiterates it in a series of widely spaced asides to the reader." Almost as if answering Brownstein's critique, Golden, commented in an Amazon.com interview: "I was not able . . . to really create a fully developed character in the Chairman . . . Because my father and mother divorced when I was young, my father moved away when I was seven or eight, died when I was thirteen, and for some reason I suppose it's emotionally toxic territory. And I just have a difficult time writing about it. And the Chairman was in many ways based upon my father . . . When the Chairman was on the page, things were inert. I had so much trouble trying to create a believable person!"

Other reviewers also found fault with Golden's characterizations, including John David Morley, who wrote in *Working Woman* that Golden's "decision to write an autobiographically styled novel rather than a nonfiction portrait is most obviously justified in terms of empathy . . . Unfortunately, Sayuri's personality seems so familiar it is almost generic . . . What about the woman inside the sumptuous kimono, underneath the white mask?" Morley said the character Hatsumomo has "the potential one looks for and finds wanting in the heroine . . . with as many bad sides as Sayuri has good ones." Morley felt that if Golden "had been willing to develop this richer, more complex character, he might have been able to rouse the kind of empathy the novel needs—and perhaps one or two other qualities besides. Eroticism, for example." Morley said the book is much more successful with its facts, "filled as it is with colorful nuggets of information."

Much of the novel's verisimilitude results from Golden's use of detail, as Golden himself told Repps Hudson of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, "Absolutely everything's in the details. The book will fail, at least by my standards, if you don't get the details right." Lindsley Cameron wrote of Sayuri in the *Yale Review*: "By the time she is living happily ever after at the Waldorf, the reader has learned quite a lot about geisha culture . . . Many of these 'facts' are sartorial: not since reading the memoirs of that delightful seventeenth-century transvestite the Abbe de Choisy . . . have I encountered such drooling dwelling on the details of costume. The effect is piquant, something like reading soft-core pornography that keeps turning, as though in a dream, into the catalogue of a textile auction at Christie's." Brownstein also contended that Golden "is masterful at describing teahouses, hairdressers' shops and alleyways of Gion, the Geisha district of Kyoto. He excels, too, at teaching us about the way geisha put on makeup, the stages of their education and how they earn their living." "The meticulous research makes Gion come alive," wrote Hannah Beech in *Time International*. "Hatsumomo slathers on facial cream made



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Sidelights: (Continued)

of nightingale droppings, and geishas burn one-hour incense sticks to keep track of how much to bill per night . . . Like a geisha who has mastered the art of illusion, Golden creates a cloistered floating world out of the engines of a modernizing Japan." Among the work's other enthusiasts was *Library Journal's* Wilda Williams, who asserted that Golden "has brilliantly revealed the culture and traditions of an exotic world, closed to most Westerners," and a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, who wrote, *Memoirs* is "rendered with stunning clarity . . . Golden effortlessly spins the tale."

Memoirs of a Geisha sparked controversy in one arena. In 2000, after publication of the Japanese translation, former geisha Mineko Iwasaki brought suit against Golden for supposedly breaching her promised anonymity and for libeling her. "I spent seven to eight hours a day for two weeks talking to him, but he did not get anything right," Iwasaki complained to *U.S. News & World Report's* Joseph L. Galloway. Because of the fictional memoir format, used in the West in such classic works as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders* and because of the author's acknowledgment of Iwasaki's help at the book's opening, Iwasaki contended that Japanese readers believe she has done everything the main character of the book has done. In 2002 Iwasaki published her own memoir, *Geisha of Gion*. Golden has continually maintained that although Iwasaki influenced his portrayal of Sayuri in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, the "character of Sayuri and her story are completely invented," as he wrote in the preface to *Memoirs of a Geisha*.

After *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Golden began work on another historical novel, this time to be set in the United States. As he told Hudson, "My pep talk to myself now is that I did this by permitting myself to take a risk and giving myself a real challenge and figuring out how to rise to it. My job now is to do exactly the same thing."



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Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *Memoirs of a Geisha*

Author:

Arthur Golden was born in Chattanooga, TN, but has spent most of his life in the east—the east coast and the Orient. He comes by writing honestly, a member of the family that publishes the *New York Times*. His education has been impressive, thorough, and targeted (in retrospect) directly upon the novel he has created. Golden has the credentials of a scholar: he has received degrees in art history, Japanese history, and English, having studied at Harvard, Columbia, Boston University, and Beijing University. He speaks Mandarin Chinese and Japanese, and has worked as a journalist in Japan. Golden's early attempts at this novel (it has had a 15-year gestation) had the scholar's flaws—they were long, detailed, and dry. Eventually, friends introduced him to Mineko, a retired Kyoto geisha, who was willing to talk to him at length about the geisha life. He incorporated his expanded insights into a much shorter new draft, which he wrote in the first person, in the voice of a geisha. The rest, as they say, is history. *Memoirs of a Geisha* became a tremendous bestseller, remaining on the bestseller lists for years. A western man, a husband and father, created the entirely persuasive voice of an engaging young Kyoto geisha.

Summary:

Chiyo, a poor 9-year-old child in a Japanese fishing village, is sold with her older sister to a Kyoto okiya (geisha house). She begins the long training period that should culminate in her becoming a geisha, but the enmity and scheming of the okiya's ranking geisha, Hatsumomo, leaves her mired at the harsh level of a maid. By chance, Chiyo encounters the Chairman; she is in tears, and he is kind and sympathetic. Chiyo makes this chance encounter the touchstone of her hard life; she fantasizes about becoming a real part of the Chairman's life. Her fortunes improve dramatically when Mameha, an established, top-level geisha, takes an interest in her. Her interrupted training is resumed, and she eventually becomes a geisha, taking the name of Sayuri. Mameha is a superb strategist; she orchestrates growing triumphs for her protegee—from invitations from the rich and famous, to the highest-ever fee paid for her mizuage, the sale of her virginity. World War II intrudes upon the geisha's artificial world; the entertainment district is broken up, and life becomes hard. Nobu, a one-armed, badly burned, rich hero and free-thinker, has taken a liking to Sayuri, and arranges a wartime placement for her that is very hard, but allows her to survive. Returning to the geisha district, she finds Nobu ready to become her danna, her formal patron. She, however, still has her dreams of the Chairman, and—past kindnesses notwithstanding—she is unwilling to tie herself to Nobu. She engineers a sexual assignation with the drunken Minister, as a means of breaking with Nobu, arranging for him to be led to the scene. The Chairman is led there instead, and it appears that all of Sayuri's worlds—real and fantasy—are crumbling around her. Instead, we learn that the Chairman has had Sayuri in mind just as long as she has been focused on him. They get together, and stay together. Sayuri has the Chairman's son. As she gets older, Sayuri arranges to relocate to New York City, where she runs a small teahouse for visiting Japanese. It is in New York that she dictates the story of her life to a local historian.

Discussion Questions:

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one



Book: *Memoirs of a Geisha*

Discussion Questions: (Continued)

of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

Can *Memoirs of a Geisha* be read as a fairy tale?

It's difficult to read it as anything else. Cinderella (Sayuri) fortuitously encounters Prince Charming (the Chairman); the story is finally the record of how they overcome obstacles and misunderstandings to achieve their happy ending. Along the way, there are the mean-spirited attacks of the step-mother (Granny and Mother) and the step-sisters (Hatsumomo and Pumpkin), countered by the unexpected help of the fairy godmother (Mameha). It is a pattern of behavior that bridges the East/West cultural divide—it is interesting to note that the first written examples of this favorite Western tale are actually from the Orient. Final results are more important than the individual steps; the happy ending is the ultimate goal. The absurd tests/ordeals that provide the key to “happy ever after” are important because of what they accomplish, not because of what they are. Whether it is putting on a glass slipper, or having sex with the Minister, success allows the girl to move on to her proper destiny.

Is character or setting more important?

Setting is far and away the more important factor. The overwhelming success of the novel is probably due to the skillful grafting of an entirely familiar plot upon a rootstock of exaggerated exoticism. Golden's own view is that the “subject matter is so fascinating” that any problems with the reception of the novel should be ascribed to him as an author. “The way I saw it, if I'd failed to bring the world of geisha compellingly to life, I'd done something dreadfully wrong.” The fascinatingly articulated society that Golden had spent so many years investigating was the foundation upon which the novel was built. It took two separate 800-page discarded drafts, ten years of research and writing, a timely introduction to a retired geisha who was willing to talk, and a complete change in perspective from third-person to first-person narrative. But the very difficult process resulted in a work that Golden knew would be compelling, as long as he didn't get tripped up by mechanics. The characters, on the other hand, are a problem. They are not complex; they don't change and grow. The crux of the plot depends on Sayuri's tenacious retention of a pre-teen daydream, and its eventual blossoming out into reality. Hatsumomo's malice is unrelieved by any human complexity. The Chairman's benignity is recognized by the child, and celebrated by the adult. About the only character who provides a surprise from within is Pumpkin, whose last-minute sabotage is quite unexpected and only cursorily explained.

What effect does the introduction of the translator have on the story?

The circumstantial manner of the introduction enhances the plausibility of the account. This benefit is strong enough to become a sort of drawback—Golden speaks of the surprising number of readers who only belatedly realize that they are dealing with a work of fiction, and who are resentful that the nice geisha with whom they empathized so strongly never actually lived and breathed. In terms of how the author wrote the book, the told-to-an-interpreter approach is a godsend for dealing with cultures that are both very interesting and very different. For a first-person narrator—operating, presumably, somewhere in the culture that produced her—to spend a lot of time explaining the how and why of the minutiae of her daily life doesn't make very much sense. Golden says “it would never occur to Sayuri to explain things—that is, it wouldn't occur to her unless her audience was not Japanese.” Dictating her memoirs in New York allows the appropriate inclusion of pages of detail that we, in the West, not only appreciate, but need.

There is a constant tension between beauty and brutality. Is this troublesome?



Book: *Memoirs of a Geisha*

Discussion Questions: (Continued)

We have been raised in a culture where “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” is always in the background; we equate the good and the true. To be presented with a picture in which a sensuous and sophisticated appreciation of beauty co-exists with living conditions of appalling brutality is at the very least dissonant. We don’t like to believe that people whose aesthetics we respect could possibly be as uninterested as they appear in the issues of suffering and justice. And yet that’s just what is going on in this novel. Golden talks about the infinite pains people take in designing, weaving, fitting, and wearing kimono—there is a strong stylized sense of beauty that controls this aspect of geisha life. By contrast, Sayuri talks of a maid at a neighboring house being beaten, but her focus seems to be that the recurring cries were distracting—it was like noting that it was raining and the thunder wouldn’t let one sleep. There is no feeling that a sensibility that understands the kimono should not comfortably accept the beatings.

Is Sayuri a prostitute?

A lot of effort is put into trying to establish that she is not. The *gei* of geisha refers to “arts,” and a geisha is thus (at least linguistically) an artist. The continuing training of a geisha is directed not at sexual technique but at the arts that are used in entertaining. Unlike the western prostitute, most of what she is paid to do is not sexual activity. Sayuri talks of the young western woman who draws back aghast, thinking “I’m talking with a prostitute.” (p. 291) She escapes with her escort, a man 30 or 40 years older, and Sayuri finds herself wondering “why she can’t sense how much we really have in common. She is a kept woman, you see, and in my day, so was I.” (p. 291) And that is finally the author’s judgment too, that a geisha is more usefully thought of as a kept mistress than as a prostitute. Having said all that, the successful geisha’s livelihood is very much tied up with how she allocates her sexual favors—a standard that many would use in identifying prostitution. The *mizuage* bidding wars, paying to relieve a very young geisha of her virginity, seem to be more closely related to the bordello than to the finishing school. As Golden reminds us “of course, sex does enter into it. Maybe you could say sex enters into most things. . .”

“We don’t become geisha so our lives will be satisfying. We become geisha because we have no other choice.” (p. 294)

While Mameha’s words have an ambiguous ring, it is a closed, deterministic world that she is describing. Becoming a geisha may seem like the world opening up to a beginner, but, in fact, it just reflects another variety of limited options. Increased scope is illusory; you can’t do any more, you just have more done to you. Or, as she points out earlier, “Generous people don’t become geisha. They become the patrons of geisha.” (p. 173) Actually, it is quite surprising that the geisha is as resigned and unimpressed with herself as she appears. We are looking at the top end of Kyoto geisha, where life is as good as it’s going to get. Even at this level, the profession is presented more as a means of coping than as something worthwhile on its own terms. Part of this can be ascribed to the cultural speech mannerism, in which speakers refer to themselves in a dismissive Winnie the Pooh “bear of little brain” fashion. But much of it seems to be a real belief that the hardships and long training have not accomplished very much. And indeed, the fairy tale ending is much more common in fairy tales than it is in life.

“Nothing is bleaker than the future, except perhaps the past.” (p. 336)

This is the observation of Raiha, described as one of the most intelligent geisha. Her mother was a geisha as well, and Raiha’s opportunities for observing and analyzing the life of Gion were as good as anyone’s. The pathetic thing is that this remark was accepted by the geisha community as the joke of the season; its truth was eclipsed by its wit. It reflects the kind of resigned world view that appeared to be common in the entertainment district. Nothing was likely to change; nothing was going to get better. When Auntie wants to offer the tearful Chiyo some comfort and good advice, the best she can do is to say, “bear up. There’s nothing more any of us can



Book: *Memoirs of a Geisha*

Discussion Questions: (Continued)

do in this world." (p. 104) A grim determinism controls everything from the local to the cosmic.

"... [W]hat we Japanese called 'the onion life' peeling away a layer at a time and crying all the time." (p. 347)

This is a beautiful image that Golden had the wit to incorporate into his novel. The reference is to Mr. Arashino, the kimono designer, who kept his family alive and well and together at the expense of periodically selling one of the glorious kimono that he had collected over the years. The density of the image, that combines several universally-known qualities of the onion, and makes them a metaphor for a difficult life, is poetic.

Is there a discernible ethics in Gion?

There is certainly a great deal of order, and a sense of how things ought to be done, but it doesn't add up to a coherent sense of how things should properly be. Before she is even twelve years old, Sayuri reflects "For a flicker of a moment I imagined a world completely different from the one I'd always known, a world in which I was treated with fairness, even kindness—a world in which fathers didn't sell their daughters." (p. 110) What is relevant is that this is just a passing, isolated 'flicker,' and it doesn't lead anywhere. When she has finally carved out her place in Gion, Sayuri does not much question how or why she got there. Nobu—always the radical voice from outside—asks her point blank: "Don't you feel there's right and wrong in this world, and good and bad? Or have you spent too much of your life in Gion?" (p. 387) It is completely in character that Sayuri's response is first to change the subject, then to try to distract Nobu, and finally—when it is clear that an answer must be given—to provide the answer that she thinks Nobu wants to hear. The issue, for her, is not what is true, but what will minimize friction. In that same way, what seems to provide the frame for the geisha life of Gion is etiquette and the law of contracts. Right and wrong is a greater luxury than the geisha can afford.

What is the relationship between home and the world of the geisha?

They are kept very much apart. Golden says that Japanese "have what we would consider situational ethics. But they don't see it that way. When you're with a wife and children, a certain behavior is OK. When you're out with your buddies at night, another behavior is OK." Home is important, but irrelevant to Gion. We are told that Nobu is unmarried, but mainly because it is unusual. A man in his position can usually be assumed to be married. The existence of wives is mainly an afterthought in this novel. The only time marital arrangements were discussed in any detail, was to describe the replacement (in a family business) of a legitimate son, with the (more competent) illegitimate son by a mistress/geisha. And we probably wouldn't have heard that much if there didn't have to be some reason for moving Sayuri permanently to New York.

Is Pumpkin believable?

Pumpkin is the most fully formed of the minor characters, although that is not saying a great deal. We see a stretch of her life that at least gives us examples of a chronological range—from the not-too-bright child with her tongue sticking out, to the not-too-bright woman who is unexpectedly popular as a geisha survivor. What gives us trouble is that this mildly decorous party girl suddenly develops a long-festering sense of grievance that triggers the novel's crisis. When she responds to Sayuri's distraught pleas by leading the Chairman (instead of the asked-for Nobu) to her sex scene with the Minister, it is an action unlike any other we have seen her make. Grounds for resentment are not hard to find: "I was finding it difficult to bear the burden of patience in my life, waiting for some tiny opening that might never come and that would certainly be the only chance I'd ever get. Now I had to watch as the door of opportunity was held wide open for someone else." (p. 119) This is actually Chiyo being resentful of Pumpkin's elevation to apprentice geisha status; it could as easily refer to Pumpkin's resentment at Sayuri's usurpation of her promised status of adopted daughter of the okiya. The life was too hard-



Book: *Memoirs of a Geisha*

Discussion Questions: (Continued)

scrabble and precarious to allow one to accept these kinds of setbacks with equanimity. The resentment is easy to understand; the action comes out of nowhere.

Is clear sight respected?

Not particularly. People say they value intelligence, but it doesn't often mean very much. Granny says "What we need is a smart girl, not a pretty girl. That Hatsumomo is as pretty as they come, and look at what a fool she is!" (p. 43) At this point, Hatsumomo is the undisputed star of the okiya; if she could clone her, Granny would be delighted to have a dozen of her working there. Nobu is about the only one to analyze and act on his analyses, and about all it gets him is a reputation as an anti-social curmudgeon. Nobu briefly switches fairy tales to *The Emperor's New Clothes*—while Sayuri is busily insulating her reactive statements with convoluted layers of politeness, Nobu says the unsayable: "A woman who acts like a fool is a fool, wouldn't you say?" (p. 315)

What is the impact of Nobu's deformities?

The geisha world is very constrained and traditional. People fill their assigned roles, and there is little movement. What movement there is, is often the result of personal appearance. Your looks become the wild card that sometimes gives you unexpected success. Underlying character is secondary—Sayuri muses "I had to wonder if men were so blinded by beauty that they would feel privileged to live their lives with an actual demon, so long as it was a beautiful demon." (p. 225) In this setting, Nobu's physical shortcomings are crucial. Against reason and sentiment, success for Nobu is ruled out. The relative attitudes are practically instinctual. Beauty and the Beast notwithstanding, Nobu is just not an acceptable mate for Sayuri. It doesn't matter that he is loaded up with abstractly appealing attributes—he is brave, intelligent, loyal, rich. He is the only character who seems to spend much time thinking. He defies convention and places more value on his own insights than on prescribed forms. Despite all this, we cannot comfortably form the picture of Nobu's hideously scarred skin and incomplete anatomy paired with Sayuri's artful perfection. The only real question is how the rejection can be effectively arranged, and the bizarre theatrics of the loveless assignment with the Minister merely underline the importance of somehow breaking off the relationship with Nobu.

Is becoming a geisha an improvement over the alternatives?

It's hard to imagine, but it really is. Impoverished parents would sell their daughters in order to provide for them—Golden says he has heard of cases where they sold their daughters and then committed suicide. When running away is suggested to Pumpkin, she is not interested; the free life she might arrange looks much more precarious than the often-miserable geisha life she is started on. Mr. Tanaka, in his self-serving but, presumably, sincere letter to Chiyo, says that the exceptional must take responsibility for their own success, and that it is impossible for them to achieve it at home: "The swan who goes on living in its parents' tree will die; this is why those who are beautiful and talented bear the burden of finding their own way in the world." (p. 103) If a geisha makes it through the harsh period of training and apprenticeship, she can count on comfort and security well beyond what she might have expected at home. Sayuri's eyes are opened when she accompanies Mameha on a limousine tour of Kyoto, and catches glimpses of a poverty that never showed itself in Gion: "we rarely saw anyone like these starving peasants too poor even to bathe. I could never have imagined that I—a slave terrorized by Hatsumomo's wickedness—had lived a relatively fortunate life through the Great Depression. But that day I realized it was true." (p. 184)



Book: *Memoirs of a Geisha*

Further Reading:

Junichiro Tanizaki, *The Makioka Sisters* (1976)

Set in roughly the same time period, this novel examines the crumbling home lives of impoverished Japanese aristocrats. A look at the other side of the geisha coin.

Oswald Wynd, *The Ginger Tree* (1977)

A young Scottish wife, part of the British empire in its heyday, has an affair with a Japanese count. The accommodations she must make to maintain the relationship are devastating.

Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji* (10th century)

The world's first novel and Japan's greatest work of literature. It details a 10th century aristocratic court life that exemplifies many of the arts and talents that later geisha still work hard to master.

Yasunari Kawabata, *Snow Country* (1957)

The Nobel laureate's delicate novel of the affair between a vacationing Japanese businessman and a mountain geisha. The limitations of love in a highly structured society.

Book Discussion Guide developed by Joe Sedey, a member of the staff of the St. Louis Public Library, St. Louis, Missouri, 2000.



Book: *Memoirs of a Geisha*

Random House Book Discussion Guide:

About this guide

The questions, discussion topics, and suggested reading list that follow are intended to enhance your group's experience of reading Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*. We hope that they will give you a number of interesting ideas and angles from which to approach this enthralling debut novel, which is the fictional true confessions of one of Japan's most celebrated geisha.

The strikingly pretty child of an impoverished fishing family, Chiyo is taken to faraway Kyoto and sold into slavery to a renowned geisha house where she is renamed Sayuri. Initially reluctant, Sayuri must finally invent and cultivate an image of herself as a desirable geisha in order to survive in Gion's cruel hierarchy. Through her eyes, we are given a backstage view of the ancient and secretive geisha district, Gion, and of the lives of the women who learn and practice the rigorous arts of the geisha. Behind its facade of haunting beauty the district turns out to be a viciously competitive place where women vie desperately for men's favor and largess, where a young girl's virginity is auctioned off to the highest bidder, where personal trust is almost nonexistent, and where no woman can afford even to dream about love or happiness. A timeless pocket of the world, Gion cannot remain cut off from the bustle of the modern era forever. When Japan enters the Second World War, Gion's isolation is finally breached and Sayuri must once again reinvent herself and her way of existence. *Memoirs of a Geisha* is a treasure of a book, an unparalleled look at a strange and mysterious world which has now almost vanished. It is also, and unforgettably, a dazzling portrait of a singular and most seductive woman who tells her story in a compelling first person voice.

For discussion

Many people in the West think of geisha simply as prostitutes. After reading *Memoirs of a Geisha*, do you see the geisha of Gion as prostitutes? What are the similarities, and what are the differences? What is the difference between being a prostitute and being a "kept woman", as Sayuri puts it [p. 291]?

"The afternoon when I met Mr. Tanaka Ichiro," says Sayuri, "really was the best and the worst of my life" [p. 7]. Is Mr. Tanaka purely motivated by the money he will make from selling Chiyo to Mrs. Nitta, or is he also thinking of Chiyo's future? Is he, as he implies in his letter, her friend?

In his letter to Chiyo, Mr. Tanaka says "The training of a geisha is an arduous path. However, this humble person is filled with admiration for those who are able to recast their suffering and become great artists" [p. 103]. The word "geisha" in fact derives from the Japanese word for art. In what does the geisha's art consist? How many different types of art does she practice?

Does Sayuri have a better life as a geisha than one assumes she would have had in her village? How does one define a "better" life? Pumpkin, when offered the opportunity to run away, declines [p. 53]; she feels she will be safer in Gion. Is her decision wise?

How does Sayuri's status at the Nitta okiya resemble, or differ from, that of a slave? Is she in fact a slave?

Are Mother and Granny cruel by nature, or has the relentless life of Gion made them what they are? If so, why is Auntie somewhat more human? Does Auntie feel real affection for Sayuri and Pumpkin, or does she see them simply as chattel?



Book: Memoirs of a Geisha

Random House Book Discussion Guide: (Continued)

"We must use whatever methods we can to understand the movement of the universe around us and time our actions so that we are not fighting the currents, but moving with them" [p. 127]. How does this attitude differ from the Western notion of seizing control of one's destiny? Which is the more valid? What are Sayuri's feelings and beliefs about "free will"?

Do you see Sayuri as victimized by Nobu's attentions, or do you feel pity for Nobu in his hopeless passion for Sayuri? Do you feel that, in finally showing her physical scorn for Nobu, Sayuri betrayed a friend, or that real friendship is impossible between a man and a woman of their respective stations?

How do Japanese ideas about eroticism and sexuality differ from Western ones? Does the Japanese ideal of femininity differ from ours? Which parts of the female body are fetishized in Japan, which in the West? The geisha's ritual of preparing herself for the teahouse is a very elaborate affair; how essentially does it differ from a Western women's preparation for a date?

Does the way in which the Kyoto men view geisha differ from the way they might view other women, women whom they might marry? What are the differences? How, in turn, do geisha view men? Is the geisha's view of men significantly different from that of ordinary women?

Do you find that the relationship between a geisha and her danna is very different from that between a Western man and his mistress? What has led Sayuri to think that "a geisha who expects understanding from her danna is like a mouse expecting sympathy from a snake" [p. 394]?

As the older Sayuri narrates her story, it almost seems as though she presents Chiyo and Sayuri as two different people. In what ways are Chiyo and Sayuri different? In what ways are they recognizably the same person?

Pumpkin believes that Sayuri betrayed her when she, rather than Pumpkin, was adopted by the Nitta okiya. Do you believe that Sayuri was entirely blameless in this incident? Might she have helped to make Pumpkin's life easier while they were in the okiya together? Or has Pumpkin's character simply been corrupted by her years with Hatsumomo and the entire cruel system that has exploited her?

Sayuri senses that she shares an *en*, a lifelong karmic bond, with Nobu [p. 295]. How might a Western woman express this same idea?

During Sayuri's life, Japan goes through a series of traumas and unprecedented cultural change: the Great Depression, the War, the American Occupation. How do the inhabitants of Gion view political events in the outside world? How much effect do such events have upon their lives? How aware are they of mainstream Japanese culture and life?

What personal qualities do Sayuri and Mameha have that make them able to survive and even prosper in spite of the many cruelties they have suffered? Why is Hatsumomo, for example, ultimately unable to survive in Gion?

Is Sayuri the victim of a cruel and repressive system, a woman who can only survive by submitting to men? Or is she a tough, resourceful person who has not only survived but built a good life for herself with independence and even a certain amount of power?

Why might Golden have chosen to begin his narrative with a "Translator's Note"? What does this device accomplish for him?



Book: *Memoirs of a Geisha*

Random House Book Discussion Guide: (Continued)

In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Arthur Golden has done a very daring thing: he, an American man, has written in the voice of a Japanese woman. How successfully does he disguise his own voice? While reading the novel, did you feel that you were hearing the genuine voice of a woman?

Suggestions for further reading"

Colette, *Gigi*; Liza Dalby, *Geisha*; Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*; Masuji Ibuse, *A Geisha Remembers*; Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written By Herself*; Yasunari Kawabata, *Snow Country*; Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*; Cecelia Segawa Seigle, *Yoshiwara: The Glittering World of the Japanese Courtesan*; George Bernard Shaw, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*; Emile Zola, *Nana*.

<http://www.randomhouse.com/vintage/read/geisha/>



Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *Memoirs of a Geisha*

Reviews:

Library Journal Review, June 1997

Website: <http://www.cahners.com>

Golden puts to good use his studies of Japanese culture at Harvard and Columbia in this story of Sayuri, sold into slavery at a geisha house in 1929, who finds that she's on her own when World War II starts. The 75,000-copy first printing says a lot about the publisher's commitment to this debut novel. Copyright 1998 *Library Journal Reviews*

Library Journal Review, August 1997

Website: <http://www.cahners.com>

"I wasn't born and raised to be a Kyoto geisha....I'm a fisherman's daughter from a little town called Yoroido on the Sea of Japan." How nine-year-old Chiyo, sold with her sister into slavery by their father after their mother's death, becomes Sayuri, the beautiful geisha accomplished in the art of entertaining men, is the focus of this fascinating first novel. Narrating her life story from her elegant suite in the Waldorf Astoria, Sayuri tells of her traumatic arrival at the Nitta okiya (a geisha house), where she endures harsh treatment from Granny and Mother, the greedy owners, and from Hatsumomo, the sadistically cruel head geisha. But Sayuri's chance meeting with the Chairman, who shows her kindness, makes her determined to become a geisha. Under the tutelage of the renowned Mameha, she becomes a leading geisha of the 1930s and 1940s. After the book's compelling first half, the second half is a bit flat and overlong. Still, Golden, with degrees in Japanese art and history, has brilliantly revealed the culture and traditions of an exotic world, closed to most Westerners. Highly recommended. [Pre-viewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 6/1/97.] Wilda Williams, *Library Journal* Copyright 1998 *Library Journal Reviews*

BookPage Review, December 1997

Website: <http://www.bookpage.com>

Arthur Golden is an American. He is a man. He lives in Brookline, Massachusetts. Sayuri is Japanese. She is a woman. She lives in the Gion district of Kyoto, Japan. Magically, though, in Golden's first novel, *Memoirs of a Geisha* he actually becomes the first-person voice of Sayuri, and in the process manages to strip away Western myths about geisha to fashion a tale as compelling as it is convincing. The fictional Sayuri, based on Golden's voluminous research, presents an illuminating portrait of a culture too often mistakenly considered synonymous with prostitution by outsiders. While certainly fiscal transaction and sex do occur in this context, primarily the geisha is an entertainer, one who sings, dances, converses and accompanies. In short, a type of professional companion. It is a tricky and often unfulfilling occupation, as Sayuri tells us, requiring immense tact, quick wit and at times unbearable situations. Sayuri glides readers through the arduous training and ceremony of geisha apprenticeship and the rigidly controlled structure of households and relations. This world of slivers of exposed skin, demure glances, secret passions, appearance and reputation nevertheless resonates with the hushed sound of financial machinations. A geisha needs a rich danna, or benefactor, but often, the danna isn't necessarily who the geisha desires most. However, geisha have no choice, for the fiscal well-being of the okiya, or household, depends upon proper behavior. "We don't become geisha because we want our lives to be happy," says Mam-



Book: *Memoirs of a Geisha*

Reviews: (Continued)

eha, Sayuri's mentor. "We become geisha because we have no choice. "Indeed, Sayuri has no say when, at only nine, she is taken to the okiya from a small fishing village. She has no say as she is abused and bad-mouthed by the drunken Hatsumomo, her rival in the household. She has no say when Dr. Crab outbids the Baron for her mizuage, or virginity. And she has no say in her danna, even though she hopes secretly, for years, that it will someday be the businessman known as the Chairman. Taut and clean like the colorful kimonos Sayuri wears, Golden's prose ripples through the tea houses and parties, the conflicts and pain of vanquished Japan after World War II. He plays the witty and enterprising Sayuri skillfully, holding her loneliness and companionship, her pain and pleasure, her appearance and desire in perfect tension. In many ways, *Memoirs of a Geisha* functions as a typical romance—poor girl climbs the social ladder—but Golden's exquisite execution never fails. The implicit risk of writing in a foreign voice never becomes an issue, indeed; it is forgotten as Sayuri's charm enrap-tures from the novel's first line. Near the beginning of the book, Sayuri says she used to joke that someone had poked a hole in her eyes and all the ink had drained out. While her translucent gray eyes do guide the reader through nearly 40 years, that spilled ink gracefully rolls onto Golden's pages, forming the alluring curves and supple lines of this elegant debut. Reviewed by Mark Luce. Copyright 1999 *BookPage* Review

Publishers Weekly Review, July 1997

Website: <http://www.cahners.com>

From her painful apprenticeship in the early 1930s through the years of her prime and her later career in Manhattan is rendered with stunning clarity in this fully imagined first novel. Golden effortlessly spins the tale as the dictated autobiography of quick-witted Chiyo Sakamoto, the daughter of a poor fisherman, who attains the pinnacle of geisha success. In the process, Golden evokes the spectrum of traditional Japanese society. Sold as a child by her financially desperate father, Chiyo is placed in a house for geisha as the personal maid to Hatsumomo, one of Kyoto's most sought-after geisha. There she is trained in the arts of dance, singing and the tea ceremony. Hatsumomo, however, threatened by Chiyo's beauty, treats her with unrestrained cruelty. Chiyo's position is one of indentured servitude: she may not leave until she has repaid all of her living expenses and even her original purchase cost. After many vicissitudes, Chiyo is transformed into a celebrated geisha called Sayuri; many men offer to be *her defying* Western expectations does not include sex unless the geisha chooses so. Despite legions of admirers however, Chiyo/Sayuri secretly pines for an unattainable man. Golden splendidly renders the superficiality of geisha culture: the word geisha translates to "artist" or "artisan," and the women spend hours painting on porcelain make-up, caring for their beautifully hued silk kimonos and honing clever conversational skills. Counter to everything geisha are taught, Chiyo learns that her own feelings do matter, and honoring them results in a well-earned, intelligent and satisfyingly happy ending. Foreign rights sold in 11 countries; Random House audio; author tour. (Oct.) Copyright 1998 *Publishers Weekly* Review

U.S. News & World Report, March 13, 2000

Protests of a Geisha. By Joseph L. Galloway; Steven Butler; Avery Comarow.

There's fire and smoke rising above the flower and willow world of Japan's geishas over their portrayal in Arthur Golden's novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*, which has sold more than 4 million copies in 33 languages. Now retired but once one of the most famous geisha of Kyoto's Gion district, Mineko Iwasaki, 50, says she regrets helping Golden with his research into the delicate and hidden world. "I spent seven to eight hours a day for two weeks talking to him, but he did not get anything right," Iwasaki told U.S. News. "He has made a mockery of Japanese culture." She says geishas are more artisans than courtesans—more focused on the arts of music and dance and conversation, which they study for years, than those of the futon. She adds that she was promised anonymity but was named in the book's acknowledgments, and now people think she is the model for Golden's main character, Sayuri, a young rural girl sold into a geisha house. Golden told the *Washington Post* the complaints were inevi-



Book: *Memoirs of a Geisha*

Reviews: (Continued)

table: "If someone writes a book about your 'family,' the closer it is to truth, the more you aren't going to like it." He notes that there are two fictions about Japan's geishas: "One myth is that geishas are prostitutes. That myth is wrong. The other myth is that geishas are not prostitutes. That myth is wrong, too." In the book, Sayuri emerges to become Kyoto's premier geisha in the years before World War II. Her virginity is auctioned off for a record price. "For me, personally, this is a libel," Iwasaki says. Copyright 2000 *U.S. News and World Report, Inc.*